Every Tuesday evening, a group of inmates at Florida’s Tomoka Correctional Institution gathers in a circle, heads bowed, holding hands. They pray that God would use the next few hours to spread His love deep within their hearts. This love comes to them through a surprising avenue: classic literature.

The syllabus includes stories of hard choices and redemption. In a selection from Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, dejected ex-con Jean Valjean receives grace from a Catholic bishop and turns his life around. *The Sunflower*—by Simon Wiesenthal, a survivor of multiple Nazi concentration camps—reflects on the limits of forgiveness. In *Amazing Grace*, slave-ship captain and brute John Newton encountered forgiveness so boundless that he left his lucrative career and helped to end British Empire slavery.

One inmate later expressed to the discussion leader how much the readings meant to the participants. “Guys still think about and discuss those stories on a daily basis,” he wrote, months after the class ended. “Not one week goes by that someone doesn’t use [a character] in our group talks.”

This volunteer-led program is an offshoot of a larger ministry, Horizon Communities in Prisons. Horizon was started by Texan businessman Ike Griffin and his wife, Mickey, who began volunteering in prisons together early in their marriage. They heard of an experimental program in Brazil encouraging behavioral change through communal living and accountability. With some small foundation support, the Griffins started the first Horizon Community at Tomoka; it soon spread to nine other prisons in Florida, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Texas.

When inmates join Horizon, they move to a dorm with the other program members. Everyone must demonstrate a willingness to change. Before they’ll be considered, they must show for a period of months that they can live peaceably with others. Many inmates testify that these prison communities become like the families they never had. Each is expected to behave responsibly, and dishonest actions are addressed firmly, with love. The goal is healthy relationships with others.

“I was able to really take a look inside of me and deal with the issues that brought me to prison,” says one inmate. “There was nowhere to run after Bible study,” notes another, emphasizing the importance of community accountability.

Nationally, inmates are rearrested within three years of their release at a disheartening rate of 68 percent. But recidivism for Horizon graduates from an Ohio prison between 2001 and 2008 was only 12 percent. At another facility in Oklahoma, misconduct reports on participating inmates fell to near zero. And at a Texas long-term correctional institution, none of the 25 Horizon graduates released during 2003-2007 returned to prison. Horizon was named “A Model for the Future” by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in an assessment of prisoner-reentry programs.

Funders include the Priddy Foundation of Texas and individual donors like Randy Robertson, who created the great books reading program. A retired businessman, Robertson was a longtime Tomoka volunteer. A few years ago he attended a conference by the Trinity Forum, a nonprofit that creates abridged versions of works with a powerful moral component to make them more accessible. When his involvement with Horizon came up, a Trinity Forum staff member asked if he’d like to develop a pilot reading project for prisons. Robertson spent $3,000 of his savings to buy eight Trinity Forum Readings each for more than 80 Tomoka Horizon members.

Horizon’s courses typically focus on practical aspects of improving interpersonal relationships or becoming employable. This was the first time Horizon inmates got a liberal-arts class. They looked up words they didn’t know. They worked through confusing passages. They discussed characters, and parallels with their own lives. When Robertson comes on Tuesday nights, they erupt into cheers as he enters the room.

Some of Tomoka’s toughest criminals have been visibly changed by this community reading. In the first few weeks, one would rant and make threatening gestures. By the end, he had a different message.

“Talk is cheap,” he said. “It’s about right actions and attitudes. It’s about love. It’s about dilemmas faced…grace prevailing.”

—Morgan Sweeney